

VZCZCXR06283  
RR RUEHIC  
DE RUEHSK #0382/01 3271852  
ZNR UUUUU ZZH  
R 231852Z NOV 09  
FM AMEMBASSY MINSK  
TO RUEHC/SECSTATE WASHDC 0556  
INFO RUCNCIS/CIS COLLECTIVE  
RUEHVEN/USMISSION USOSCE 0010  
RUEHZG/NATO EU COLLECTIVE  
RUEHSK/AMEMBASSY MINSK 0564

UNCLAS SECTION 01 OF 02 MINSK 000382

SENSITIVE  
SIPDIS

FOR EUR/UMB (KRUPPERT)  
FOR DRL (DNADEL)  
FOR EUR/ACE (KSALINGER AND NKRYSTEL)  
EMBASSY KYIV FOR USAID (JRIORDAN AND KMONAGHAN)

E.O. 12958: N/A

TAGS: PGOV PHUM PREL BO

SUBJECT: BELARUS:TWO CLEAR OPPOSITION CAMPS NOW EXIST

REF: MINSK 481

MINSK 00000382 001.3 OF 002

1.(U) Summary. On November 14, the Belarusian Independence Bloc (BIB), former members of the United Democratic Forces (UDF), held its founding forum in Minsk. The three guiding principles were: Belarusian sovereignty, democracy, and EU integration. The GOB waited until the last minute to approve the venue for the forum, but it did not interfere with the daylong event. Illegal white-red-white opposition flags were prominently displayed alongside EU flags; invited European legislators called on the GOB to respect human rights; and, BIB leaders derided the current regime as bankrupt and promised to lead Belarus to Europe. BIB called on the west, however, not to isolate Belarus but to engage it with conditions. The choice of Europe, BIB claimed, was not a rejection of Russia, but a desire to have relations with Russia as an equal state. Alyaksandr Milinkevich concluded the Forum with a rallying speech and offered himself as the Bloc's presidential candidate for 2011; a statement that caught at least some of the BIB leaders by surprise. BIB, having broken with UDF (reftel), also announced its intention to run its own candidates in the local elections. End summary.

A Bloc For Those Committed to A European Future for Belarus

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2.(SBU) On November 14, the newly established Bloc, which includes the For Freedom (FF) Movement led by Alyaksandr Milinkevich, held the first Belarusian European Forum. Approximately 1,000 delegates from across Belarus attended the event, along with 50 prominent guests, including European Parliament members (EMP), legislators from a number of European countries, and a number of the Minsk-based EU Ambassadors. The right of center coalition promotes EU membership as the political end state for Belarus. It includes a mix of registered (FF, Belarusian Popular Front (BPF), Right Alliance), unregistered (Malady Front, Young Belarus, Belarusian Christian Democracy (BCD) party, Party of Freedom and Progress) political parties, NGOs, and opposition youth groups. The GOB kept the organizers guessing regarding the venue until the last-minute. It did not, however, interfere in the event. Participants spoke openly and freely and the GOB security presence was not noticeable. The Forum organizers prominently displayed opposition white-red-white flags (illegal in Belarus) and EU flags throughout the meeting hall. Fifty-two journalists from state and independent media were accredited for the Forum, and a number of local non-state outlets provided unscripted and unimpeded online coverage. Paval Mazheika, a well-known journalist and senior executive of the Polish-based TV channel

Belsat, served as the Forum's moderator.

European Politicians Proclaim Belarus is European

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3.(U) The European guests called on the GOB to safeguard democratic elections, independent media, and civic freedoms in Belarus. They posited that the adoption of EU norms was not a rejection of Belarus' interest, but an affirmation of its identity as a European nation. Recorded greetings from Vacek Havel and EP President Jerzy Buzek were televised. Jacek Protasiewicz, Chairman of the EP's Delegation for Relations with Belarus urged the GOB in his speech to "respect human rights." He said the EU was not "dictating," but he did express hope that "leaders who will take the necessary responsibilities" for Belarus will emerge "when the [right] time comes." In addition, the Europeans admonished the GOB for denying visas to former Special Rapporteur on Belarus Christos Pourgourides, member of the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe, and Lithuanian MP Emanuelis Zingeris.

Affirm its Sovereignty, Promote Democracy, and then Join the EU

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4.(U) The assembled delegates applauded the emotional Belarusian language addresses by the BIB leaders. BPF Chairman Alyaksei Yanukevich warned that Belarus was "facing a serious geopolitical choice." He ruled out as "a poor option" the notion that Belarus should serve as "a bridge between Russia and Europe." BCD Co-Chair Paval Seviarynets, in his turn, called Lukashenka's regime "non-Christian" and "atheistic" and claimed that it had flourished only through "deception and corruption." He said he expected the next president of Belarus to "be a true European, have faith in God, and love Belarus." The delegates cheered when Seviarynets' declared that "we, the democratic community, shall build a democratic Belarus and are ready to take responsibility for our country."

MINSK 00000382 002.3 OF 002

5.(SBU) The Forum concluded with an address by Milinkevich in what many analysts called his opening campaign speech for the presidency. He emphasized BIB's three interdependent core principles: a sovereign Belarus, a democratic Belarus, and a European Belarus. He approved the regime's effort to go beyond just being "Europe's gas pipeline," and characterized the western policy of isolating Belarus as counterproductive. All forms of contact, he said, with Europe had to be expanded, but he also championed the adoption of "irreversible" economic and political reforms in Belarus. Favoring the EU was not a rejection of Russia, he said, as they would always be neighbors, but they needed to be so as equals. BIB would run candidates, he said, in the spring 2010 local elections. As for the 2011 presidential elections, he posited that the opposition parties will nominate a number of candidates, reflecting the different visions of Belarus's future that exists among the opposition. As for BIB's presidential candidate, if called upon, he said he was ready to fulfill the role. Charge noticed a surprised look on the BPF's leader face regarding the last statement. Three days after the Forum, the United Democratic Forces (UDF) co-chair, United Civic Party leader Anatloy Levidkov, affirmed that UDF would still hold a primary to select its own presidential candidate.

Comment

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6.(SBU) BIB's entry into the political field creates at a minimum two political opposition camps. BIB's objective for Belarus is EU membership, but to achieve that it points out democracy must take root first, and to be sure that's possible Belarus's sovereignty must be protected. Thus BIB rejects the policy of isolating Belarus and supports a limited accommodation with the regime if it continues its European trajectory and movement away from a Union State with Russia. UDF now covers a center to left grouping of parties, youth associations, and NGOs

united by their common objective of removing Lukashenka from power; isolation they believe is an effective tactic. Both BIB and UDF support market reforms; and both BIB and UDF blur the lines in their coalitions between political parties, youth associations, NGOs, and independent newspapers. An example was Paval Mazheika, a senior executive of the Polish-based TV channel Belsat and former Milinkevich's Presidential press secretary, playing the role as moderator for BIB's Forum. The GOB has refused to accredit Belsat as a media entity in Belarus.

It is too early to say if what occurred this fall was a splintering of the opposition or a maturing of the Belarusian political process where parties begin to define themselves along political ideological lines. The April 2010 local elections, in which both BIB and UDF have committed to run, may provide some insight into the question.

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